

Triple Roles of Appalachian Farm Women: Household, Farm, and Wage-Earning¹

PENNY L. BURGE²

This article describes the home, farm, and wage-earning roles of a sample of farm women who appear to be successful in managing their roles and contributing to their families. Role descriptions are based on indepth personal interviews and include measures of attitudes toward married women and work, self concept, and family decision-making structures. Implications are discussed as they relate to educational opportunities.

One section of the United States, Appalachia, which includes the western part of the Commonwealth of Virginia, has a farm system in which women have many complex and overlapping roles. Like most rural farm women, they often have a major impact in the family farming system, in food production and use, and in the family decision-making and economic support structure.

The roles which these rural farm women assume have traditionally been an integral part of their gender identity. For example, a division of labor usually exists in the farm household, where the women are in charge of the care and socialization of the children, as well as the household and garden decision-making and labor. The men primarily take care of the responsibilities outside the domestic sphere—they own the land; they market the produce; they receive bank credit; they are the ones who actually run the farm [1]. This division of labor is flexible in a pragmatic sense—when there is a job to be done, it may be less important who does it than that it get done [5]. Women, for instance, are active participants in what is defined ideologically as the man's world, though men do not commonly participate in the household tasks [4]. It seems, then, that women have to assume a number of different roles as compared to their men, especially when there are children in the family [2]. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to determine the family, farm and labor force roles of a group of women who are successful in managing their roles and contributing to their families.

Methods

After a review of the literature pertaining to the roles of Appalachian women and their attitudes and beliefs about those roles, an interview schedule was developed and extensive personal interviews were conducted with 25 farm women. They were identified by the local home economics extension agents as representative of women from small farms in their area. The interviewer was a

female who was previously employed as a home economics extension agent in a similar Appalachian region. At the time of the interviews, she was a stranger to the women; therefore, she was introduced to each subject by local extension agents. All of the interviews were conducted with the adult women in the family and no other family members were present. The emphasis of the interviews was on the roles of Appalachian women in the family, on the farm, and in the labor market.

The sample for this study consisted of farm women living in Washington County in southwestern Virginia. The majority were born, raised, and have continued to live in the Appalachian area of the United States. Most of the women were high school graduates with no desire for further education. The most common ages were between 30 and 49.

Findings

Thirteen of the women were employed outside the home between 20 and 40 hours per week. Of these, the majority worked within the public school system as teachers, teacher's aides, or cafeteria workers. Twelve of the employed women lived within 15 miles of their place of employment and drove themselves to work. They described their main reasons for employment as personal satisfaction first and income second. When asked to indicate sources of discrimination in their employment, only two of the women believed that they were discriminated against in benefits and one in salary.

None of the 12 unemployed women wished to work outside the home. Their primary reasons for remaining unemployed were the needs of their children or the wishes of their husbands. When indicating the level of adequacy of their total family incomes, 23 of the women reported that this income was at least adequate for their families' needs. All 25 of the women were married. When asked who was the head of their households, 22 of the women stated that their husbands were. The remaining three

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²From Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 211 Lane Hall, Blacksburg, Virginia 24061

Table 1
Off-Farm Work Status of the Couples

Both work full-time	3
Husband full-time, wife part-time	5
Husband full-time, wife unemployed	6
Wife full-time, husband unemployed	6
Both unemployed	5

n = 25

stated that they shared this responsibility with their husbands.

Like their wives, the majority of husbands had a high school education, and fourteen were employed off their farms. Of these, 12 worked 40 or more hours a week. The types of employment of the husbands varied: three worked in factories and two each were teachers, business managers, and post office employees, respectively. Table 1 presents information on the off-farm work status of the couples involved in the study. The average number of children within each family was slightly less than three. When both parents worked, relatives and older children cared for young children.

The average hours per week spent by the women cooking was 18. They worked an average of 16.5 hours cleaning house and 9.6 hours doing laundry. Four of the women also reported doing other work at home such as china painting and cake decorating.

Eighteen of the women had frequent contact with home economics extension agents, while seven had no contact. The most commonly reported help provided by the agents was general information on household problems and assistance with 4-H activities. No contact with agricultural extension agents was reported by any of the women.

The majority of the women reported living on family-owned farms with both spouses' names listed on the deeds. Twenty-three of the families did some crop farming with the average farm acreage in crops being 76. Hay was raised most frequently and in the largest acreage, though corn and tobacco were also frequently reported as being grown. Four of the women personally grew and derived profits from crops of tobacco. All of the farms had livestock: cattle were reported in the largest numbers with sheep second. Six of the women had a few head of livestock of their own.

When asked what types of work they did in the farming operation, 16 women reported doing the bookkeeping and 11 helped with planting and harvesting. All of the farms contained a family garden, with 14 of the women being primarily responsible for its care. Five of the women believed that their lives on their farms were easier than their mothers' lives due to today's more modern equipment. An additional five women believed there was no great difference between the farm work they did and the farm work their mothers did. Only five of their mothers had worked outside the home during the respondent's youth.

Table 2
Attitudes Toward Married Women and Work

Items	Means ¹
A. A married woman's most important task in life should be taking care of her husband.	3.24
B. A working wife should not try to get ahead in the same way that a man does.	3.64
C. A working wife should give up her job whenever it inconveniences her husband.	3.52
D ² . Having a job should be just as important to a woman as encouraging her husband in his job.	3.92
E ² . A working woman should be able to make long-range plans for her occupation in the same way that her husband does for his.	4.16
Overall Mean	3.70

n = 25

¹Response range = 1 (traditional) to 5 (nontraditional)

²These items were reversed to compute means.

As a part of the interview, the women completed a 5-item subscale, which measured preference toward married women's work roles on a traditional/nontraditional continuum [7]. A traditional orientation indicated preferences for continued role differentiation between wives and husbands, with occupational and household behaviors being ascribed chiefly on the basis of sex. In a study of young married women using these items, Scanzoni reported the inter-item reliability to be .81, Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha. Table 2 presents each statement and the mean response for the current study. The total mean item score for this sample was 3.7 from a possible range of one to five where one represents a traditional response. Results suggest that the Appalachian women's beliefs were somewhat mixed regarding whether a woman should seek employment outside the home when it conflicted with her role as a wife, but overall responses favored nontraditional roles.

The respondents also completed a 10-item scale developed by Rosenberg which measures an individual's self-concept perceptions [6]. This Guttman scale has a reproducibility of 93% and item and individual scalabilities of 73% and 72% respectively [6]. In responding to these items, the majority of the Appalachian women were positive about themselves and believed that they had a number of good qualities. The total mean response was 3.03 from the possible range of one to four representing a positive self image. Table 3 lists statements concerning self-satisfaction and the means for each.

Another section of the interview schedule consisted of 15 items regarding home and farm decision-making. The

Table 3
Self Concept

Items	Means ¹
A. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	3.05
B. At times, I think I am no good at all.	2.80
C ² . I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	3.16
D ² . I am able to do things as well as most other people.	3.04
E. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	3.28
F. I certainly feel useless at times.	2.66
G ² . I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.	3.08
H. I wish I could have more respect for myself.	2.80
I. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	3.28
J ² . I take a positive attitude toward myself.	3.20
Overall mean	3.03

n = 25

¹Response range = 1 (negative) to 4 (positive)

²These items were reversed to compute means.

husbands were described as making the majority of the decisions concerning farm equipment and crops. The husbands and wives cooperatively made decisions affecting investment and borrowing of money, while the wives made the decisions concerning home furnishings and child care. Table 4 presents the summary of these responses.

Implications

This study provides a profile of a selected segment of Appalachian farm women; they reported adequate incomes and had received at least secondary educations. Though the respondents generally expressed nontraditional attitudes toward women's roles they practiced traditional ones: several did not hold jobs outside the home because of the needs of their children or the wishes of their husbands. In this study the husbands were described as primarily making farm-related decisions while women were concerned with household matters including child care. This finding provides further evidence of the relatively traditional roles held by the sample. A limitation of this information results from the scale's greater emphasis on areas of decisions related to farming. Most described their husbands as heads of their households. The women who worked outside the home were employed in traditional service-oriented occupations. When asked about their perceptions of sex discrimination in their workplaces, few incidences were reported.

Table 4
Who Makes Decisions?

Decisions	Means ¹
A. Buy farm equipment	4.00
B. Change crops, crop acreage, or livestock	4.17
C. Buy or sell land	3.46
D. Borrow money	3.36
E. Select fertilizer	4.61
F. Hire farm hand	4.00
G. Invest money	3.44
H. Attend a farm meeting	3.72
I. Buy farm magazine	3.56
J. Buy home furnishings	2.72
K. Select child care arrangements	2.27
L. Decide who works outside the home for pay:	
1. Husband	4.06
2. Wife	2.32
3. Children	2.92
M. Select social activities	3.00
Overall mean	3.44

¹Response range = 1 (wife only) to 5 (husband only)
n = 25

The assessment of the self concepts of these Appalachian women indicated positive feelings about their abilities. It can be concluded that they are satisfied with their traditional lives and yet their reported nontraditional beliefs about women's roles is puzzling.

Discussion

Increased education for the multiple roles small farm women assume in the home, farm, and work force could possibly further enhance their self-satisfaction. Further participation in networking activities which produce tangible benefits for themselves and their families could also expand the self images of the women. This further education should include both husbands and wives and could focus on family decision-making methods for both household and farm issues in order to better utilize the skills and knowledge of both partners.

One source of assistance in these efforts would come through agricultural and home economics extension. While this sample reported receiving information about household issues, the women received no agricultural preparation or education. Yet most participated in some ways in the farm production, a few even having their own crops and livestock. In small farm settings it is very difficult to separate the farm issues from household ones

[3]. Therefore, both male and female family members need preparation for both household and farm responsibility, a preparation that is not currently the standard in Appalachia. This would require extension agents in both agriculture and home economics to work cooperatively with both sexes. Because of cultural constraints, this would be facilitated if the extension personnel were not sex segregated within the two subject areas.

Results from this research also provide implications for lower-income Appalachian women. These women would benefit from increased participation in community-related organizations and educational institutions, which would in turn improve their networking skills and opportunities. Additional employment skills, including agriculture-related training, would be important. With the two-wage-earner family as the norm in our current society, rural women need job market skills. Without these skills they too often find unskilled labor with long hours necessary to support themselves and their families.

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