



Chet Fukushima

# Women on commercial farms

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## ***Most would like to become more involved in management decisions***

It is common knowledge that women contribute substantially to agricultural production in California, and their numbers are growing. U.S. Department of Labor statistics show that the number of women employed solely or principally as farm operators and managers has doubled between 1970 and 1980, and the Census of Agriculture for California reports that women who were farm operators increased from 7.6 percent in 1978 to 9.4 percent in 1982. We believe these numbers underestimate the number of women in farming: the Census of Agriculture gives only one operator per farm, and in most cases, the husband is designated as the operator, even though the wife may share the responsibility of running the farm. Despite these statistics, there have

been few studies on the role of women in farming in California.

Our study of women on 207 commercial farms in Yolo County included those who were either farm operators or married to farm operators. In all cases, these operators owned at least some of the land they farmed. We selected Yolo County, because a wide diversity of crops are grown on more than 85 percent of the land, making agriculture the county's largest industry.

We identified the population for the study from two lists — one from the Assessor's office of farmers paying property taxes in the county and the other from the Agricultural Stabilization Board listing farm owners. By using only the names appearing on both lists, we were able to

draw a population of 372 commercial farmers who owned at least part of the land they farmed. Excluding tenant farms, nonfamily corporation farms, and hobby farms, the final population was 47 percent of the farms listed by the census in Yolo County.

A review of more than 600 journal articles dealing with women in agriculture revealed no data on roles of women in farming in California, even though it is the leading agricultural state. We conducted our study to obtain baseline data on the roles women play in decision making and managing the farm, family rearing, and several other activities associated with farming. Information was collected by telephone interviews in the spring and summer of 1984; we used a form of interview based on similar studies in New York, Washington, and Wisconsin. Pilot testing was completed by three interviewers.

The 372 commercial family farms produced 207 complete interviews. All of those for whom telephone numbers were available were contacted. Several women did not speak English; some declined to participate; and some were eliminated because they no longer farmed. *Cont'd*

## Characteristics of sample farms

The average farm size was 541 acres, which is close to the Yolo County average of 559 reported in the 1982 Census of Agriculture. More than 90 percent of these farms had irrigation, and 70 percent of the acreage farmed was irrigated. One-third used surface water, 45 percent used groundwater, and the remainder used both. Gross farm income of over \$50,000 annually was reported by 42 percent; a like number reported income under \$25,000; and the remainder (14 percent) had incomes in between. The farms produced, in order of importance, fruit/nut crops, wheat, barley, tomatoes, livestock, rice, corn, vegetables, seed crops, and safflower.

Individuals or families owned 67 percent of the farms, and 18 percent were partnerships. The remainder (14 percent) were family-held corporations. Much of the land farmed was leased, and many farmers leased out some of their land. We were careful to ensure that farms in the sample were similar to those of nonrespondents in farm size and type of farming. Consequently, the findings that follow are as accurate a representation of the conditions in Yolo County as possible under the conditions of the study.

## The family

The farms in the sample may be considered typical commercial farms in California's Central Valley. One spouse in four worked off the farm; of these, most worked full time. Half worked in managerial, professional, and sales types of positions. Others held positions such as repairman, truck driver, and governmental employee. Of the wives, 29 percent were employed off the farm and, like their husbands, most worked in professional administrative types of work, with some in sales. In general, husbands were older: one-fourth were over 65 years of age compared with one-fifth of the wives. More than two-thirds of both groups were in the 50-and-over age range. Eleven of the farm women had outlived their spouses.

The educational attainment of both wives and husbands was higher than anticipated for persons of their age. Of the wives, 31 percent had BA, BS, or advanced degrees compared with 27 percent of the husbands. Nearly two-thirds of each group had some post-secondary education. This far exceeds the average educational level of residents over 25 years of age in Yolo County, where 23 percent of the females have college degrees. The state average for female farm operators/managers is 18 percent with a four-year college degree.

The educational level in Yolo County is higher than in surrounding counties. For

example, in Sutter County, 17 percent of the males and 12 percent of the females held four-year college degrees compared with 31 and 23 percent in Yolo County. The presence of the University of California at Davis may contribute to this relatively high level of education. Only 23 of the farm women had majored in agriculture and 14 had chosen business, while most (62) had been in the social sciences and humanities.

Kinship appeared to be important on the farm. Some 89 percent of the women had relatives living within 30 miles, of whom one-third were children or grandchildren, while the remainder were parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, or cousins. These relatives were involved in the operations of one-half of the farms in the sample. Children living at home included 47 females and 70 males; of these, only 9 females were over 18 years of age compared with 27 males. This finding suggests that more young men than women find employment on the family farm.

Each farm had an average of 2.3 households. Some members of these households were kin, others were hired workers. Each farm household had an average of 2.7 persons, of whom 1.2 were engaged in farming full time.

## Farm women

Nearly all (95 percent) of the women had living spouses; 11 were widows. About three-fourths lived on the farm itself, while others had their primary home in a nearby town or village. More than half had been reared on a farm or ranch, and about half identified themselves as housewives. Those reared on farms were most likely to consider themselves farmers or ranchers. Most were happy to be involved in farming. They appreciated the privacy, peace, and quiet that the environment provided. A small group (about one-fourth) saw isolation as a disadvantage.

For the most part the women did all the housework with some assistance from children; over half said they would welcome more assistance from their spouses. In fact, the women reported having 93 percent of the responsibilities for meal preparation and about 73 percent for the care of the children. During the peak season, women averaged 18 hours per week in farm work; this decreased to about 9 hours in the off-season. Also, during the peak season, they devoted some 31 hours weekly to family and social duties and another 9 hours to family-related recreation. Obviously, the 40-hour week is ignored during the busy season.

Farm women continue the long tradition of food production for family consumption. Three-fourths of those surveyed had home gardens or orchards;

two-thirds preserved foods through canning or freezing; and one-third produced animals for household consumption.

Maintaining the yard was the sole responsibility of half of the women. They also played a major role in noncommercial animal production on the farm. When farm products were directly marketed, this was usually the task of the woman. Likewise, she had major responsibility for helping with the bookkeeping. This service is now purchased on 10 percent of the farms.

It is evident that women are interested in becoming more and more involved in the major production decisions on the farms. Of those in the study, 43 percent wanted to become more involved — twice as many as those who saw their roles in these areas decreasing.

The role of women in farming is complicated and is becoming more complex, but for the most part, the respondents were content. When asked the types of work they preferred, 32 percent indicated housework, 38 percent said farm work, and 12 percent liked both. Only 18 percent expressed dissatisfaction with their roles.

Further analysis of the data, which will be reported in a later study, suggests that the roles of women in farming may be related to farm size. As the farm becomes larger, the wife becomes less involved in major management and production decisions.

## Conclusions

Women in Yolo County play a much more active role in farming than is commonly assumed, and indications are that their involvement in decision making will increase. Twice as many (43 percent) wanted more involvement compared with those who saw their roles in management decreasing. Farm women in Yolo County had reached much higher levels of education than had female farm managers/operators statewide and were well above the average for women in Yolo County.

The family farm is still a healthy institution in this county. The women were, for the most part, happy with their involvement in farming. More preferred to do farm work than housework. They had major responsibility for the household. Nearly all had family gardens or orchards, and most canned or froze produce for off-season use. They enjoyed rural life and liked being part of an extended family.

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