

Women in the agricultural labor market

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A survey of graduates of agricultural colleges indicates women have not yet broken the job barriers in agriculture.

In a study of 95 women and 84 men graduates from postsecondary education programs in California, the recent increase in female agricultural enrollments was examined to see if it also reflected a change in female participation in the agricultural labor market. In agriculture, as in other fields, there is a tendency to highlight women in nontraditional jobs and to assume these visible newcomers indicate a real shift towards labor market equality. This study and other sources, however, indicate that women have not yet broken the job barriers in agriculture. This situation is not unique to agriculture but reflects the more general occupational situation for women. In asking informants about the jobs they went to when they completed their agricultural programs, we concentrated on the following areas: salary, job position and status, and limiting factors for women in agriculture.

The data presented here are a portion of an exploratory study examining the current status of women completing postsecondary

agricultural programs in California. Students who had completed the programs during 1977, 1978, or 1979 were contacted by phone. In the final sample of 84 males and 95 females, about one-fourth were graduates of community colleges, one-half from state universities, and the remainder from the University of California. Because the study was brief and exploratory, random sampling was not possible. The statements that follow therefore apply only to those students with whom we spoke.

Salary

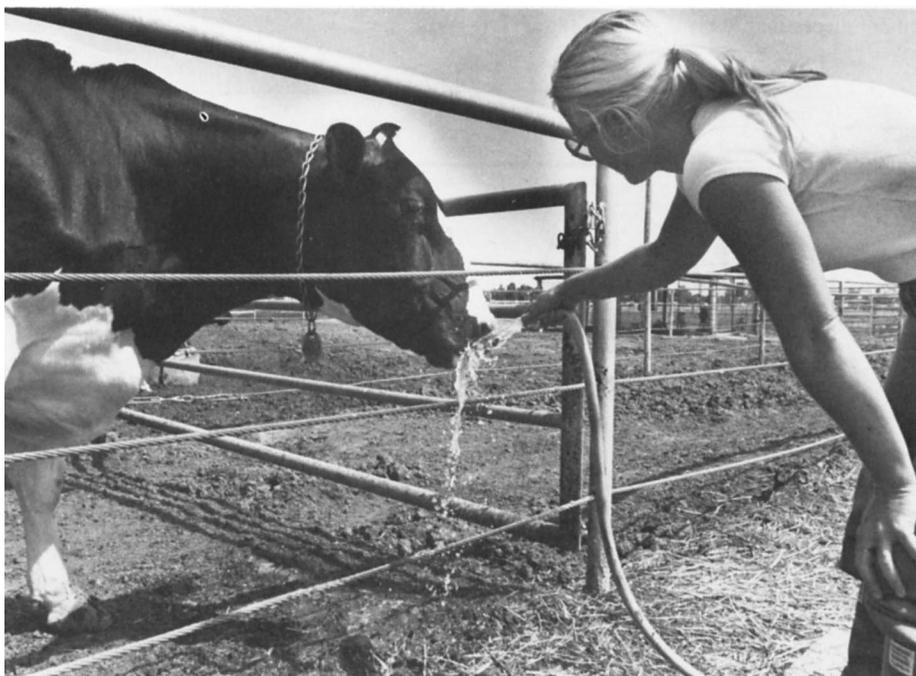
Paid women workers in the United States today generally face a depressed economic situation. Since 1961, the average woman's salary has been about 59 percent of the average man's salary, and this percentage has steadily decreased. In 1955, for example, women earned approximately 64 percent of men's salaries. The gap between men's and women's wages has not been affected by the increased numbers of women in the work force. Men still dominate the top positions and continue to hold the major proportion of top salaries.

Economists estimate that discrimination alone accounts for between 29 and 43 percent of this wage differential. Women are often denied access to the primary labor market; the supply of women is therefore increased in the secondary market, where wages are lower and jobs less prestigious.

Table 1 shows the disparity both in starting salaries between men and women and in pay increases. Men start out, on the average, with higher salaries and receive pay increases larger than those received by women; this trend has been noted by other researchers. Anthony Kuznick, for example, in "Women in Agriculture in a Two-Year College" (1975) noted: "After two years of working, males received an average raise of \$220 per month compared to \$110 per month for females."

Based on our study, the gap between men's and women's starting salaries also widens each year. Women's starting salary moved from 83.8 percent of men's in 1977 to 72.3 percent in 1978 and finally to 69.5 percent in 1979.

Differences in salaries received by men and women graduates of the various educational



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Carol Russell, with a master's degree in dairy nutrition from U.C., Davis, now manages the dairy herd at California State University, Fresno. Her assistant is also a woman.

TABLE 1. Average Initial and Current Salaries in California by Year of Employment*

Salary	1977	1978	1979
Initial			
Men	\$10,970 (22)	\$12,030 (23)	\$12,010 (16)
Women	\$9,195 (23)	\$8,700 (24)	\$8,350 (18)
Women's salaries as a percentage of men's	83.8%	72.3%	69.5%
Current (1980)			
Men	\$17,910 (22)	\$18,100 (23)	\$14,260 (13)
Women	\$12,850 (21)	\$12,508 (21)	\$9,430 (13)
Women's salaries as a percentage of men's	71.7%	69.1%	66.1%

*Numbers in parentheses are numbers of persons in the sample.

TABLE 2. Average Salaries of 1977-79 Graduates of Various California Educational Institutions*

Salary	University of California	State universities	Community colleges
Initial salary			
Men	\$10,962 (15)	\$11,612 (30)	\$12,227 (16)
Women	\$8,920 (17)	\$9,552 (35)	\$6,905 (13)
Women's salaries as a percentage of men's	81.4%	82.3%	56.5%
Current salary (1980)			
Men	\$16,457 (15)	\$17,380 (27)	\$18,221 (16)
Women	\$12,771 (15)	\$12,220 (30)	\$8,648 (10)
Women's salaries as a percentage of men's	77.6%	70.3%	47.5%

*Numbers in parentheses are numbers of persons in the sample.

TABLE 3. Average Salary, by Major, of Graduates from California Institutions*

	Initial salary		Current salary (1980)	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Agricultural economics	\$12,310 (9)	\$8,840 (5)	\$17,840 (9)	\$12,040 (5)
Animal science	9,520 (4)	8,260 (10)	17,720 (4)	10,990 (7)
General agriculture	11,810 (5)	10,890 (5)	13,350 (4)	15,670 (4)
Ornamental horticulture	11,810 (10)	8,270 (21)	17,790 (10)	10,310 (18)
Plant science	13,140 (4)	8,260 (8)	14,740 (4)	12,110 (7)

*Numbers in parentheses are numbers of persons in sample.

institutions revealed some interesting patterns (table 2). In comparing men's earnings, those of the University of California graduates were lowest both at the start and in 1980; those of community college graduates were the highest. It can be argued that the educational or theoretical background from the University of California had a smaller initial payoff than the practical focus of the state universities and community colleges for men in agriculture. For women in our study, the opposite seemed to be true. Women from

state universities did better initially, but in 1979 those from the University of California had the highest salaries. Women from the community colleges earned far less than the others in both categories, and the wage differential between men and women was greatest here (women's salaries 56.5 percent of men's initially and 47.5 percent in 1979).

Women from the community colleges were at a disadvantage in two ways. They lacked practical experience, as did most of the women in the study, and they lacked the

educational credentials to compete in the labor market. The university system, while characterized as being too theoretical for men in the job market, was an advantage for women, because education appeared to give them a marketable asset.

Agricultural economics was representative of the salary situation (table 3). For a few women, general agriculture has been a lucrative field with the highest average starting and present salaries of any field. Probably the most striking contrast in salaries was in the animal science category, where both men and women started with modest salaries; although women's current salaries increased by about \$2,000, men's current salaries almost doubled.

Women tended to hold jobs that paid hourly wages, which generally signify lower status and lower pay. Over half (56 percent) of the women were paid an hourly rate, whereas only 30 percent of the men were in this situation.

Job position and status

Increased enrollment of females studying agriculture in California, from practically none a decade ago to 30 percent of the enrollment in 1979, means more and more women are vying for agricultural jobs each year. Many of them are finding desirable jobs, and some are beginning to compete with men in the primary sector of the job market. Most women, however, are still competing for low-paying, low-status jobs in the secondary sector. In other words, even when men and women with comparable academic preparation are in the same general occupational category, such as agriculture, women are segregated from the better paying, more prestigious jobs.

Nationally, women have a higher unemployment rate than men, and the gap is widening. For example, in 1960, 5.9 percent of women and 5.4 percent of men were unemployed. By 1975, the rates had risen to 8.6 and 7 percent, respectively. In 1979, the unemployment rate for women was 7 percent, and for men only 4.9 percent.

In this study, 11 percent of the women, but only 4.8 percent of the men were unemployed. Another 8.4 percent of the women interviewed were not in the paid work force

and not actively hunting for a job. This factor is important, because active discrimination in the job market is associated with the high unemployment rate among women. As a result of the limited opportunities, several women in this study indicated they had ceased to look for jobs in agriculture and were looking elsewhere.

Some of the women found themselves in jobs for which they were overqualified or in jobs that required no agricultural training. About one in five females was a secretary or bookkeeper in a nursery, on the family farm, or in agribusiness. A slightly higher proportion of women were in sales positions, primarily in ornamental horticulture. Many stated that their job could be done without advanced education in agriculture, yet employers required a degree in ornamental horticulture.

One common assumption was that government, because of court mandate, would be the major employer of women in agriculture and that private industry hired only a few token women. However, women in this study, for the most part, were employed by the private sector. Only 27 percent had worked or presently were working on government jobs. This, nonetheless, was double the proportion of men working in the public sector.

Limiting factors

It is inferred from these observations that women in agriculture, both in this study and in general, are at a disadvantage in salary and job status. Women continue to predominate in the low-paying, low status, dead-end jobs in agriculture.

Barriers to women in employment and advancement can range from seemingly harmless jokes to direct discrimination. Often the discriminatory attitude emerges in relatively subtle acts that, taken individually, seem to be of little importance. Women hesitate to take action or complain, because they fear they will be branded as troublemakers. Women in this study reported that subtle acts were not isolated incidents, but formed a pattern of obvious discrimination. This type of discrimination is hard to quantify and, even if often unintentional, creates another barrier for women who desire to enter the more prestigious positions in agriculture.

Possibly the most obvious problem for the women in this study was actual or perceived lack of experience in agriculture. Fewer of the women than men came from farm backgrounds, and the women felt this restricted them from competing equally with men for jobs. Comments like, "Men get jobs because they have more experience" were heard

throughout the interviews.

Although lack of experience was often used to reject female applicants, the possession of experience did not in itself guarantee marketability. One male noted: "The farmers are prejudiced. They wouldn't hire a woman with experience, but they'll hire a man with none." Most of those in the study felt that employers tended to look at each male applicant as an individual and determine whether he would be suitable for the job, but that they assumed the women did not have the necessary experience and treated them as if they were all at the same no-skill level. An example of such an attitude is the statement by one male who was in a position to hire employees: "Having never hired a woman before, I would assume she's not capable." Another woman expressed her frustration: "The lack-of-experience factor is just another way of keeping women out of agriculture."

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Opportunities to enter production agriculture are limited by basic economic factors that face both men and women, yet men still appear to have the advantage. In this study, over half (60 percent) of the males from farms returned to that business, but only 16 percent of the women from farms returned.

Not surprisingly, one area in production agriculture that seems to be open to women is in the care of animals. One woman said: "Men are beginning to recognize that women with their 'mother instinct' do better with animals. If an animal gets sick or needs help at night, guys don't want to take care of it, but women will. They're more conscientious, notice more of what's going on, and they're not just there to make money."

This image of self-sacrificing women caring for animals is played up generally in agricultural literature. Perpetuation of this idea tends to keep women in the traditional feminine role, working for love instead of money and doing those things that men don't want to do anyway—like nursing a sick animal.

Another factor limiting employment of women was the issue of physical strength. Many of the women in the study felt physical strength was overemphasized: "The beef industry is a male industry. There's an idea that

beef cattle are harder to manage (than small animals). This is a myth, because no one picks up a cow and weighs it. You use a tool. Men just want to keep the cattle industry sacred."

Men, predictably, felt that strength was a real separating issue: "Out in the field men are better than women. Any time there's a lot of physical work, a man is better." When women applied for jobs that really did require strength, they were often turned down without the opportunity to show whether or not they could handle the job.

Because of initial prejudice, women who were hired felt they had to work extra hard to prove themselves capable and that they were watched more closely than a man in a similar position. The message imparted is that women have to be more qualified than a man for the same job. A woman hired to do a "man's job" often becomes the unofficial representative of every other woman, and if she fails, it is not considered an individual failure, but a failure for all women.

Although these problems are primarily attitudinal in nature, they do indeed form a pervasive, insidious pattern of sexism.

Is the agricultural industry changing? Are employers more willing to accept women as more of them enter the job market? A number of people in this sample felt that, as the men coming out of college today begin to move into positions of responsibility and power, acceptance of women would follow. They felt that their peers understood that there is no difference between men and women as employees, and the most important criterion is ability. From the general responses of male informants, however, it would seem that many prejudices of the older generation are still in full force in the upcoming generation.

The men who appeared to be most threatened by women entering the agricultural labor market were those in, or searching for, positions similar to those for which the women were applying. Men coming out of agricultural colleges today are the ones who feel the pressure from women.

Thus it appears that women will have a difficult time gaining acceptance in agriculture for two major reasons: structural sexism and economic competition.

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