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A Profile of Female County Agricultural Agents in Today's CES

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A Profile of Female County Agricultural Agents in Today's CES

Abstract

Female county agents with agricultural program responsibilities consist of only about 11.4% of the total population. The study discussed here created a profile of women employed by the Cooperative Extension Service with agricultural program responsibilities at the county level. A mail questionnaire was sent to a census of the population (N = 488). Despite a high level of job satisfaction, almost 60% of the women felt they had experienced barriers and challenges in their profession as a result of gender.

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Introduction

Who could anticipate the plethora of choices and careers open to the educated woman in 2004? Fields and professions once monopolized by men now open their arms to the throngs of educated and enthusiastic young women. Even the most traditional and conservative fields have found value in the acceptance of gender diversity. In 1991, The Council on Diversity in Extension submitted their strategic plan "Valuing Differences and Celebrating Diversity," emphasizing the need to strengthen diversity and pluralism in the Cooperative Extension Service (CES).

However, in 1996, an analysis of CES professional staffing data showed that only a slow and minimal process of change in recruitment, selection, and retention practices had occurred. Further findings indicate that women and minorities were significantly under represented in all levels of management and all areas of CES. While CES has long used women in the areas of family and consumer education, agriculture remained the domain of men. In determining the population for the 2003 study discussed here, the researchers found that little progress had been made. Less than 12% of all CES agents with agricultural responsibilities nationally were women.

Statement of the Problem

Like any other institution, the American labor force continues to experience multiple changes. In 1997, women accounted for 46% of the labor force as compared to only 29% in 1950. Other changes are more interesting. For example, 90% of male executives under 40 are fathers, yet only 35% of female executives under 40 are mothers (National Multicultural Institute, 1997). The U.S. Department of Labor also reports that the ratio of women's earning to men's earning is still unbalanced. In 1970, women averaged 59.7% of men's salaries in similar positions. In 2000, women averaged 76% of the male counterparts' salaries (Women's Bureau, 2001).

In 1986, the mythical "glass ceiling" was first labeled by two *Wall Street* reporters in reference to

the invisible barriers that block women from top jobs (Catalyst Report, 1993). The U.S. Department of Labor (1991) defines the "glass ceiling" as artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified women from advancing into mid- and senior level administrative positions.

Similar patterns in attitudes, barriers, and bias are seen when women desire to take on nontraditional occupations. The US Department of Labor lists over 110 nontraditional occupations for women. Nontraditional is defined as any occupation where one gender comprises 25% or less of the total employees (USDOL, 2001). Women in agricultural and Extension education are considered a minority population, or nontraditional.

In a study by Foster (2001), the number of female secondary agricultural education teachers nationally was 16%. This number had not changed in more than 10 years. At the university level, female agricultural and Extension educators in academic departments comprised only 14.7% of the total population (Seevers & Foster, 2003). Maddy's qualitative study (1991) using a census of female CES directors or associate directors had only a population of eight.

In a traditionally male dominated field, like agricultural and Extension education, the concept of the "glass ceiling" is a real and dominant force. Barriers inhibiting women in nontraditional fields are complex and inter-related. According to a 1999 survey by Catalyst, the barriers to women's advancement as seen by successful women included:

1. Male stereotyping and preconceptions about women,
2. Exclusion from informal networks of communications, and
3. Lack of significant experience (Catalyst, 2001).

In more recent studies, the top barriers facing women in agricultural education at the secondary level (Foster, 2001) and university women in agricultural and Extension education (Seevers & Foster, 2003) were:

1. Acceptance by peers and other males in the agricultural industry,
2. Balancing family and career, and
3. Acceptance by administrators.

According to USDA (ECOP-PODC, 1997), barriers facing women and other minorities in CES include lack of commitment from senior managers and university administration, resistance of some clientele groups to work with staff from diverse backgrounds, and lack of specific goals and targets for attaining a diverse workforce.

Purpose of the Study

The study discussed here was designed to create a profile of women involved in Cooperative Extension as county agents with primary responsibility for agricultural programs for adult audiences. Knowledge about women who have pioneered positions in Extension education provides valuable role model information for upcoming generations of female educators. Additionally, the study sought to describe challenges and barriers perceived to be unique to women in agricultural Extension.

Methods and Procedures

The population of the study was a census of female county Extension agricultural agents in 49 states. One state declined to participate in the study. Subjects were identified using the 2002-2003 County Agents Directory. Names were verified when necessary by contacting states to obtain or verify information and/or using state developed websites. The final accessible population was N = 488.

The instrument created by the researchers contained five sections designed to address the objectives of the study. Face and content validity were assessed using a panel of experts in research/statistics and agricultural education and 21 Cooperative Extension county 4-H agricultural agents or state specialists with CES in agriculture. The slightly modified instrument has been used in two previous studies (Foster, 2001; Seevers & Foster, 2003). Reliability assessment for those two studies was high. Reliability was not reassessed for this study.

Data were collected April through June 2003 following a modified Dillman's (1978) procedure for a mail questionnaire. Responses from early and late subjects were compared, and no differences were found to exist. The results were generalized to the target population (Miller & Smith, 1983). The final usable response rate was 79% (N = 386). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data.

Findings

The majority of female county agricultural agents are married (68.1%) or have never been married (21%). Less than 10% of the respondents indicated they were divorced or widowed. Only slightly more than 50% of the subjects reported having children. Ages of children ranged greatly from infants to grown adults. The majority of women fell in three age categories: 26- 30 (18.5%), 41-45 (18.8%), and 46-50 (18.5%). Ethnicity reported was overwhelmingly Caucasian, with 93.2% (N= 359). Minority populations of Hispanic, African-American, and Native American all reported between 1.3 and 1.8% of the total population.

Women working with agricultural programs within CES have been employed from 1 to 32 years, with a mean of 8.6 years. Areas of specialty ranged widely to include the common areas of livestock and crop production to more uncommon areas of marine science and maple syrup production. Over 42% of the subjects reported their professional duties involved serving clientele in more than one county. Salary ranges varied greatly, with the largest number of respondents reporting an annual salary between \$40,000 - \$44,000. Salaries over \$65,000 were rarely reported.

Several questions related to job responsibilities and division of time. Slightly less than 50% of the respondents reported holding administrative responsibilities in relation to their position. Subjects reported spending the greatest percent of their time working with adults in agricultural programs (70%), followed by 4-H and youth programs (18%) and other duties (9%). Only 30% of the respondents reported supervision of interns as part of their job responsibilities. The number of interns supervised varied, but the majority had supervised only one student intern.

Additionally, subjects were asked the degree of comfort they felt with current job responsibilities and the degree of preparedness they felt to address the content areas in their current position (Table 1). Responding to a 5-point Likert-type scale, the majority of respondents were very comfortable or comfortable (90.5%), while over 85% felt prepared or very prepared to address content areas within their position.

Table 1.
Expressed Degree of Comfort and Competence

| Rate your degree of comfort with your current job responsibilities. | Very Comfortable | Comfortable | Neutral | Un-Comfortable | Extremely Un-comfortable |
|--|-------------------------|--------------------|----------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| | 139 (42.2%) | 159 (48.3%) | 22 (6.7%) | 5 (1.5%) | 1 (0.3%) |
| To what extent do you feel prepared to address the content areas your position is responsible for? | Very Prepared | Prepared | Neutral | Somewhat Unprepared | Very Unprepared |
| | 95 (29.1%) | 184 (56.4%) | 33 (10.1%) | 11 (3.4%) | 1 (0.3%) |

A summary of major job responsibilities addresses almost every process and subject area possible. Agents were involved in needs assessment, planning, teaching, evaluation, serving on boards and committees, making farm/ranch visits, conducting research, and working with clients, volunteers, media, and the larger community. They addressed every topic between agronomy and zoology. Common areas of expertise were livestock, crop production, horticulture, and agri-business. Despite the content area, the primary responsibility reported was meeting the needs of clientele served.

Most female agricultural agents reported their highest educational degree as a masters (68.1%). Some reported only a bachelor's degree (21.6%), while 8.3% had a doctorate or equivalent. Degree areas were almost exclusively in specialized agricultural disciplines, including animal science, agronomy and horticulture, natural resources, and agri-business. Thirty-six percent of the women expressed an interest in achieving a higher degree. Previous experiences in agricultural and Extension education while in high school were high, although more subjects participated in 4-H (34.8%) than FFA (20.5%). Those that did not participate in either program identified the primary reasons as agricultural education classes were not available or not having an interest.

Almost 80% of the respondents reported an average of 5.5 years of agriculture-related work experience prior to entering work with the Cooperative Extension Service. Type of work experience varied greatly. In addition, many subjects (60.2%) completed professional internship experiences prior to being hired by CES.

When asked if they felt they had experienced any barriers or challenges in their profession due to gender, 57% of the women responded positively. Common themes emerged in the identification of these challenges. The most common were: lack of acceptance from male colleagues and clients; the need to "prove yourself"; no mentoring or inclusion by male peers; and the "good 'ole boy system." One woman said, "Peers don't seem to give the same level of respect for subject matter knowledge. Clients are at times hesitant to talk to a woman." Others recognized the challenges

and coped the best they could. One woman said, "Folks still call and say, 'is the man in?' I laugh and say that the man is now a woman!"

Women were also asked to identify what they perceived to be the greatest barrier faced by female agents with agricultural responsibilities even if they had not experienced them. Responses were similar to the ones previously mentioned, but additional comments included topics such as personal attitude, balancing work and family and lack of mentors or role models. One woman said, "The greatest barrier is their [the woman's] own attitude of not being good enough." Another respondent said, "there are not many women as mentors/examples; it's still a bit of a man's profession." And finally, one individual summed it up by saying, "the typical sexist barriers--lower pay; glass-ceilings; harder to get promoted; having to do it better than our male co-workers; not having 'someone like me' to work with; It's very difficult during pregnancy or with young children."

When asked to identify any sacrifices made to reach a current level of achievement in their career, the number of responses was significant. Common sacrifices noted included time away from family; lack of personal or social time; the decision to not have more children or to delay having a family; and a firm commitment that the pay offered is too low for the educational requirements of the job. When asked if they would make the same sacrifices again, 42.0% said "yes," 13.7% said "no," and 25.1% were unsure. Many subjects agreed that sacrifices were made but also felt that other careers also demanded decisions and sacrifices.

Women Extension agents in agricultural programs are satisfied with their jobs. Almost 85% of all respondents reported being satisfied or very satisfied. Additionally, more than 81% would encourage other women to pursue the same career in CES.

However, when asked to identify why they would support or encourage others, the responses varied greatly and were not as overwhelmingly positive. One woman said that, "until we are paid our worth and are treated with respect, there's no need to encourage anyone to go into this discipline." Others responded positively without hesitation, "It is valuable, productive work. We make a difference in people's lives and environment. I could be their mentor and help them." Still others had a positive experience themselves but were reluctant to encourage others due to unique circumstances. One woman wrote, "Not in the current budget and political climate. I have a feeling that Extension's days are numbered."

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

A profile of female county Extension agents with agricultural program responsibilities reveals that most are between the ages of 26 -30 and 41-50. There was a noticeable drop in the age category between 31-40. This age range is typically when women are having and/or raising their children. Many women struggling to balance work and family will choose to leave the profession or seek other employment.

How do we recruit or retain quality employees in positions that demand extra time and irregular hours? Can jobs be modified? Are there some tasks that could be completed with properly trained community volunteers? Can jobs be shared? In the traditional patriarchal society, the male is the breadwinner, and the female is the nurturer and caregiver. Should any employee be forced to make a decision between a career and a family?

Extension agents are predominately Caucasian. This is consistent with previous studies of women in agriculture. It should be noted and of concern that not only are women in general under represented in these professions, but women of an ethnic minority background are severely under represented. A pressing issue with the Cooperative Extension Service is diversity and pluralism. What can be done to attract women and minorities in these roles?

The majority of female agents were married, and more had children than did not. However, more Extension agents fell into the never married category than did secondary agricultural education teachers (Foster, 2001) or university women faculty (Seevers & Foster, 2003). Extension agents were well educated, with the majority possessing a master's degree. This is not a surprising finding because most states require a master's degree for hire or obtaining one within a specified period of time.

However, average salary levels for the position were only between \$30,000 - \$40,000. Consistent comments from the subjects reported that the salary was too low and the hours too long for the education required for the job. Given low salaries and demanding hours, is CES able to attract and retain the best and brightest? Previous studies have indicated these types of motivational factors are common causes for high turnover.

Subjects found to have more than 5 years of agricultural work experience prior to beginning a career with Extension were likely to have been involved in either 4-H or FFA in high school. Coming from an agricultural background better prepares individuals for the roles and responsibilities they will be undertaking as well as assists them in understanding the clientele they will be serving.

Extension agents, overall, were very satisfied with their current position in CES. They felt comfortable with expected job responsibilities and were prepared to address the content areas of the position they were hired for.

Most women had completed at least one internship prior to working with Extension. While practical internships provide only a snapshot of an organization or job, they are key experiences in helping to understand the organization, the career, and the job. Many career decisions made are based on the quality of an internship experience. They can be a valuable tool in matching the right person to a profession and reducing turnover. Internships as pre-service experiences should be required and continued. Women were not only satisfied with their job, they also felt they were supportive and encouraging to other women in the profession or desiring to be in the profession.

Regardless of gender, CES jobs are demanding of time and energy. Despite a high level of job satisfaction, almost 60% of the women felt they had experienced barriers and challenges in their profession as a result of gender. These barriers are consistent with those previously identified in other disciplines as well as in agricultural education (Catalyst Report, 1993; GenderWatch, 2001; Williams, 2001; Foster, 2001; Seevers & Foster, 2003). Barriers (perceived and real) can be addressed only through awareness and communication, but first there must be agreement that they do exist. Lack of acknowledgment or failure to address ultimately leads to conflict, job dissatisfaction, and high turnover rates.

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