Barriers and Supports: Finding Their Place in Agricultural Extension

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Abstract

Women of the twenty-first century continue to break old patterns and norms. As Cooperative Extension nears its century mark in the United States, women are carving a niche as agricultural agents. The purpose of this study was to describe unique challenges regarding personal lives and barriers unique to female agricultural agents in the United States. The study also investigated existing mentoring and support systems. A mail questionnaire was sent to a census of 488 women in 49 states. A final response rate of 79% was achieved. Most frequently cited barriers associated with job role were acceptance by male peers and clientele and differential treatment due to gender. Overall barriers perceived by women in extension were categorized as stereotypical roles, gender biases, and balancing professional and personal responsibilities. Common sacrifices noted were family and personal well-being, energy and time commitments, and money. While women notably value encouragement and support from other women in the profession, many also indicated they had been discouraged by others when they considered their career path. While overall, respondents were satisfied with their job and career path, many were still hesitant about whether they would do it again. Encouragement of others to follow in the same path was frequently qualified by stating concerns and barriers previously identified.

Keywords: Women, cooperative extension appointment, gender, equity, minorities

Introduction

“Liar, briar, limber, lock—three geese in a flock; one flew east, one flew west, one flew over the cuckoo’s nest...”

Nursery rhymes are traditional around the world. Lithuanian children hear of The Swan Bridge on the lake of Trakai. Hans Christian Andersen gave Denmark the story of Thumbelina. Tales from South Africa speak of a lost spear and the quest for the hand of a great king’s daughter, even ancient Egypt had the Cinderella story of Rhodopis and her Gilded Sandals. All of these tales and many more create the mystical world of a childhood sacred in all societies; a world that speaks of beautiful princesses waiting to be rescued by daring princes. Perhaps the world of nursery rhyme and fairy tale would better serve modern daughters with the Chinese folk tale, The Girl Who Used Her Wits. “A woman’s issues of soul cannot be treated by carving her into a more acceptable form as defined by unconscious culture, nor can
she be bent into a more intellectually acceptable shape by those who claim to be the sole bearers of consciousness” (Estes, 1997). Delving into the world of children’s psyche may open scholarly eyes to the true value of this study.

“Fairy tales, myths, and stories provide understandings which sharpen our sight so that we can pick up the path left by the wildish nature” (Estes, 1997). As Estes points out these stories sharpen our focus to the true dilemma facing women of the new millennium.

Women in the twenty-first century seek independent and fulfilling professional lives. Upon entering the new century women found themselves in a state of flux. “Old patterns and expectations have broken down, but new ideas seem fragmentary, unrealistic, and often contradictory. Even statistics confuse. By the 1990s, 77 percent of married women with school-aged children were in the workforce….still women’s earnings remain just 74 percent of men’s” (Orenstein, 2000, p.4). Should women wait to be rescued? Should they be bold and daring and save themselves? Can a woman be both a good wife and mother and a successful professional?

Americans believe in dreams. Parents tell their children they can be anything they dream of being, if they are willing to work hard. Girls are told they can walk through doors formerly closed to their gender and be successful on that path. But logic and simple mathematics often disagree with these concepts. Women begin to loose their fertility around the age of 28, just about the time their male counterparts are getting into full swing in the race to be noticed and achieve professional success. The pressure of family choices becomes strong. Leaving the work force would be instant professional suicide. Is it any wonder that women in this emotional double-bind might chose to “fly over the cuckoo’s nest?”

**Theoretical Framework**

In the 1991 strategic plan set forth by the Council on Diversity in Extension, emphasis was placed on strengthening diversity and pluralism in the Cooperative Extension Service. In determining the population for this study, the researchers found that less than twelve percent of all CES agents with agricultural responsibilities were women. Traditional roles of women are deeply ingrained in our society. Combined with the fact that Swanson counted 184 countries with similar extension systems in 1990, many of which are based on similar concepts and principles as the United States model, this study’s potential has far reaching impacts on the profession (Seevers, et al., 1997).

The 19th Amendment was passed in 1920, granting women the right to vote. It also served as a precedent for other legislation aimed at improving conditions for women. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 provided for equal pay for equal work without regard to sex (USDL Women’s Bureau, 2000). Women continue to struggle to climb both corporate and public ladders in the working world. What barriers remain to prevent their success? What supports exist to strengthen their quest?

Virginia Valian defined a concept for consideration of the many phenomena around women in the workplace. Gender schemas are non-conscious hypotheses that affect our expectations of men and women, our evaluations of their work, and their performance as professionals (Valian, 2000). Schemas are acquired in early childhood and continue throughout our adult lives. An example of gender schemas at work would be how men and women rank job characteristics. A study comparing salary, opportunity for advancement and intellectual challenge, reported by Valian, noted that more men rated salary at the top of this list than women and that more women rated intellectual challenge as the most important job characteristic. Women value a well-rounded life. This includes work, love, friendship, and other interests (Eccles, 1994). According to gender schemas, values are reinforced according to gender throughout our lives. Child care is at the heart of the female schema; both genders expect women to serve as the primary child caregiver. This issue is often reflected in decisions women make regarding their careers.

A mentor is defined as an experienced adult who befriends and guides a less experienced adult. A significant relationship exists between having a mentor and job satisfaction (Fagan, 2003). “New agents enter Extension with novel ideas and vision of improved programs. This abundant energy is quickly diminished as the new agent becomes “spread thin” among organizational, administrative and clientele expectations—not to mention personal, family, career, and professional obligations” (Zimmer & Smith, 1992). In addition, having a mentor was
significantly related to being a mentor. In a profession where less than 12 percent of the population is female, the opportunity for same-gender mentors is limited. The benefits of any mentoring program are reduced if availability, proximity, accessibility and similarity of programs are missing from the mentor-protégé relationship (Thompson, Warnick & Cole, 2001).

Why can’t a woman be more like a man? Too few qualified women in the talent pool and blatant discrimination could once be blamed for discrepancies between men and women in the workplace. Today the reasons are subtle and far more complex. Blatant discrimination still exists however. “Forty years after the passage of Equal Pay Act, women earn 76 cents for every dollar men earn—up from 61 cents in 1960” (McGee, 2003). However, when “like” individuals mentor each other positive results occur. A recent study involving African-American female administrators in Extension revealed that a small group (six) of women reached out to each other to form a support group. They looked to each other for problem solving and programming collaborations and enjoyed individual successes because of their connection (Moore & Jones, 2001).

Subtlety within a patriarchal society is often hidden within the guise of gender expectations. Women’s expected role in life, within a patriarchal system, is to support and men’s is to draw on this support. This becomes the expected norm. Women are expected to be caring, polite, nice people with no expected reciprocation. It is simply what they are. These concepts greatly handicap women in the workplace. If a woman breaks out of this mold she is perceived as abnormal or over-emotional and not what is “expected” for the role she plays (Fletcher, 2001). The challenge facing women in non-traditional areas becomes one of learning to communicate/interact successfully in a patriarchal world.

Purpose of the Study

This study was designed to enhance the profile created from its sister study, Profiling Female Agricultural Cooperative Extension Agents in the United States (Foster & Seevers, 2004). The study sought to describe the unique challenges regarding personal lives, barriers unique to women in agricultural extension, and existing mentoring and support systems for women in the field. From comments gleaned from the questionnaires, this study focused on the following specific objectives introduced in the original study:

Objective 1. Identify perceived barriers/challenges experienced as a female agricultural extension agent.

Objective 2. Describe experiences and roles as both a mentor and protégé in agricultural extension.

Methods and Procedures

The population for the original study was a census ($N = 488$) of women with adult agricultural program responsibilities as county agents for Cooperative Extension within 49 of the 50 United States of America. One state declined to participate in the study. Selected questions found in the five-section instrument, created by the researchers, were used to address the selected objectives. Face and content validity were assessed using a panel of 23 women (experts) involved in Extension without adult agriculture responsibilities. Data were collected between April and June of 2003. The final usable response rate was 79.0% ($N = 386$). Appropriate research procedures were followed as the researchers utilized a five-section instrument for data collection.

Comments gleaned from open-ended questions and as unsolicited remarks were grouped and categories by similarity for reporting. Utilizing a feminist approach, the researchers categorized the data into general conceptual themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Two techniques were employed to create a qualitative design for this study. Historical research and selected survey statements combined to create a more in-depth picture of the profile of women in Extension with agricultural roles.

Results and Implications

The profile of the women completing the study reflected women with mean ages ranging between 36 to 45 years (30.5%), Caucasian (93.2%), married (68.1%) and possibly have children (54.7%). This professional woman spends an average of 30 hours per week on such activities as domestic housework, recreation, religion, children’s school, and other various interests.
These women reported salaries ranging from below $25K to above $75K. However, 64.1% were in the range of $30K to $49K. The mean number of hours worked per week by the completers was 60. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents hold a master’s degree, 22% hold a bachelor’s and 9% hold Ph.D./Ed.D degrees.

Comments from a series of open-ended questions were grouped and reported by objective. In order to maintain authenticity of the original meanings, the comments recorded may include grammatical errors. In addition, any possible identifying factors, such as locations or names, were removed to maintain participant confidentiality.

Objective 1. Identify perceived barriers/challenges experienced as a female agricultural extension agent.

Perceived barriers. Participants were asked to identify any perceived barriers in their professional careers. Two general categories emerged, in addition a small, but definitive group also emerged noting positive experiences in lieu of any barriers.

Acceptance by male peers and clientele: This category received the most comments. Reflecting a definite concern permeating among the respondents: Continually having to prove their ability.

I would say challenge—I’m in a small, rural county-- as a woman, I really had to work hard to prove myself.

I was the first woman hired in ___ state to do 4-H ag [agriculture] work—and I interviewed in 5 counties before [I was] hired. 13 [Thirteen] states didn’t respond to my request for a job interview. Maybe things have changed.

Hardship due to social expectations of caring for home and family—also, many men and women assume county agents are men!! Want to deal with a man.

Most producers are men and expect everyone in my position to be male. They seem to take my advise [advice] with a grain of salt.

Differential treatment due to gender: Following acceptance by male peers and clientele, many women felt they were treated differently because of their gender. Specific instances of this behavior are noted in the following statements.

Learned to tolerate inappropriate behavior from male co-worker, and come to accept that our female supervisor was afraid, unskilled and unwilling to deal with his behavior—worse she threw the issue of dealing with his behavior back on me.

I think my salary would be higher if I were a male. I also get volunteered to do a lot of cooking and cleaning.

I believe I am paid less than men with the same responsibilities.

I have not gotten jobs where I was better qualified [due to gender]. I have had to put up with a sexist work climate in some jobs. Extension is very thorough with that attitude here.

I had to leave my position due to a gender-biased supervisor. In my current position, some male colleagues can be “unwelcoming”—nothing overt, just subtle putdowns.

Peers don’t seem to give same level of respect for subject matter knowledge.

Clients are at times hesitant to talk to a woman.

Positive perceptions: Despite a much larger reporting of challenging issues, a number of the women included in the study felt they had only positive experiences. The statements below reflect that outlook at a ratio of 1 positive statement to 13 challenging ones.

It is not easy to be young and female in rural America in a male dominated profession. But, if anything, being a woman has helped me. Many people are curious to learn if I have anything interesting to share, then they realize I do.

No, actually as a female in a male-dominated field, I felt free to do different things with my job. I think I brought a different perspective to the program.

I thought I would experience some hardships with clients or colleagues, but all (or most) have been supportive and shown me great respect.

Greatest barrier. When asked to define the greatest barrier facing women in Extension
with agricultural responsibilities, comments were grouped into three categories. Individual responses reflecting group consensus were grouped and reported below.

**Stereotypical roles:** Stereotypical concepts/roles led the “Greatest barrier” category with 39% of the comments. The age-old practice of defining appropriate roles for men and women takes a different twist in the professional world as evidenced by the comments below.

*Credibility achieved by [gleaned from] male audience—they don’t think a woman could possibly have it right—and will believe a man, with the same information!

*Stereotypical roles are often reinforced by both genders.

*Proving our skills are equal to or better than those of our male peers.

*Getting the “good old boys” to take us seriously and trust the info [information] we supply.

*The perception that women aren’t as “up” on their topic as the men agents. There are always those who think you know less and just ramble on about things you don’t have.

*I think the general perception that “men do agriculture,” even in families where wives and daughters are actively involved, is the greatest barrier.

**Gender bias:** Deviating somewhat from stereotyping, responses in this category reflected blatant opposition to women in the field. In addition, an increasing number of responses noted inequitable pay situations.

*It’s a man’s world” especially in Ag.

*We are not equally paid or promoted like our male counter parts.

*Working with male field men, processors, industry reps [representatives]; I have found them to be very male chauvinistic.

*Not many women as mentors/still a bit of a man’s profession

*Why are we willing to work a lot harder than men just so we can be treated equally, while bearing a lot of [the] weight of balancing a family and career and still have enough time for ourselves?

**Sexism: I feel women must be smarter, better, faster, etc. than men.

Lack of exposure to career options—I never knew that extension was an option until later in life.

Salary, we should get the same.

Physical strength (or lack of) can sometimes be an inconvenience.

Neither my father or [nor] spouse supported my decision. There were many “old fellows” who wouldn’t give me the time of day when I started. I have experienced sexual harassment 3 times, but only pursued resolution once. I didn’t want to be labeled.

**Balancing professional and personal:** A definite level of frustration emerged as women tried to explain their effort to maintain professional standards and quality personal lives. This frustration is reflected in the following comments.

*Figuring out how to balance work and family.

*The necessary sacrifice of a personal life [to succeed in job].

*Balancing family, work and other responsibilities. My observation is that women aged 40 and older in ag extension tend to be leaders and take on enormous work loads. This is less true for younger hires. This may be progress....

*The hours—women many times still have the “traditional” role in the home. The combination can be overwhelming—my house is a disaster and I seldom cook.

*The 24/7 time commitment that is sometimes expected of extension staff is not family friendly, many women who want to have an ext.[extension] career plus a family will feel the strain and of course most will (and rightfully so) choose family.

**Sacrifices made.** Participants were asked if they felt they had made sacrifices in order to succeed in their chosen field. The majority of participants felt they had sacrificed some aspect of their personal lives or well-being. Overwhelmingly the grouping of family or personal sacrifice comments led the response for this question.

**Family and personal:** Over 90% of the 320 comments in this area reflected family and personal sacrifice; primarily revolving around children, or the decision not to have children.
Time away from home resulted in more child care required from spouse...resulting in divorce
Too focused on work—do not take enough time for family.
I feel that in order to maintain family as a priority, I have had to pass on opportunities to go higher in Extension due to expectations of working many nights and weekends without compensation.
Because Extension is not a 40 hour a week job, I have spent less time with my husband and friends
Put off starting a family [due to work demands] —less kids
[I sacrificed] My first marriage—my ex-husband was not supportive of my career choice.
The sacrifice of leaving children with others at a very young age just to get back to work and leaving them at night to serve the public. Day and night [on call] and every holiday.
My children were in day care. Often I now have evening programs that take me away from them and their activities.
My biggest sacrifice would be not spending enough time with my family. I spend lots of time with other children and families but not my own.
I am approaching 40 years old and still don’t have children. It is hard to make that decision when I am still on “limited appointment” (we serve 6 years, 2-3 year terms before getting an indefinite appointment).
I sacrifice evenings and weekend family time to fulfill my responsibilities and/or to attend in-service trainings.
I have no children. I am married, but [I] decided “you cannot have it all.”

Energy and time: Frustration surfaces in comments noting the extreme time and energy commitment for extension agents, including concerns about health and well being.
I spent a lot of time in grad [graduate] school and ended up a glorified secretary, but it is a beautiful place with nice people so I don’t mind.
Used personal leave and money to attend professional improvement conferences and do international outreach.

Money: Acknowledging this may not be related to gender, participants expressed concern over the investment capital in securing adequate credentials to serve in the Extension sector.

Objective 2. Describe experiences and roles as both a mentor and protégé in agricultural extension.

Encouragement. Where men are taught from birth to expect support, women often feel that same support is a gift instead of a reasonable expectation (Johnson, 1997). The following comments reflect the powerful impact of having or not having a support system.

Value of female encouragement: Participants noted that understanding and support from women in similar roles was invaluable—and also rare.

Because there are so few female extension agents it is necessary for us [the females] to encourage one another.
It [female encouragement] is a vital part of survival.
I was the first female to be hired in _____, the support came from males. It was limited.
In my early years there was another female specialist. We shared ideas and feelings a lot. The male attitude has changed greatly in the past 20 years!

It is rare to have women in ag. [agriculture] I did have an extension agent in natural resources give me a lot of help and advice, but not in ag.

Received excellent support from team of female agents based in a nearby city.

There are six female ag-related agents in my state. We stay in touch.

Rarely, few women in my field.

Sought advice, mentoring and guidance from women I respect.

It helps to discuss problems and situations with other women in the same line of work. Bounce ideas off them and general support. When having difficulty with co-workers to get advice [from other women].

I was the first woman in ______ to become an ag educator, therefore most of the others have utilized my experience(s). There were no others to ask [when I started out]...one specialist did provide help during the first few years.

In the beginning, now it seems kind of fragmented-each is trying to prove herself.

I was mentored by a female agent and her advice is invaluable.

I am the longest tenured woman in my state’s extension service. No one there to mentor me [when I started].

Supporting others: Even when acknowledging few mentors of their own, women in the study often realized the need for this type of support and tried to provide it for the next generation or their peers.

I make a conscious effort to be supportive of our female agents—to [support] them directly and speaking well of their strengths to others.

I really think it is important to be as positive as possible.

Discouragement. Perhaps more powerful than the reflections of positive support, this category seemed to draw well-thought out responses. The question, have you discouraged others, was especially taken with gravity by the participants.

From other women: A sad note pervaded these responses when realizing not everyone of their own gender viewed the participants as pioneers. The concept of gender roles continued to surface with these comments.

I have been discouraged by women that I work with such as farmer’s wives or other FACS [family and consumer science] agents.

When I got here, I heard about inequalities {gender}...they were telling the truth.

New agents (female) sometimes are very competitive with other female agents rather than being supportive or collegial.

I was told via an internet list serve by a woman specialist that I should get used to/accept the male/female & research/extension hierarchy in universities.

From male colleagues: In contrast to the comments from women, discouragement from men seemed to be expected and therefore not as damaging to the psyche.

I’ve been told that I need to not challenge the system [Extension] and play my female role. Also, I have received inappropriate comments [from male colleagues] in front of producers.

By the system: Another area of disappointment reflected by participants was the lack of support from the system. Unequal pay, lack of role models and time commitment expectations create a challenging environment to succeed in.

No real support for women.

Not directly, sometimes indirectly by seeing others’ [women’s] frustration.

Only because money [salary] is not equitable.

Discouraged by demands [of job] and lack of resources and time to do more.

Too much time, too little pay

Discouraged others: Responses in this category reflected growing concerns with economic cutbacks and the ability for the system to remain operational, rather than issues connected to gender. Overall, the gender related concerns revolved around family time issues.

Only when the budget was falling apart and they needed to think of themselves before clientele.
Not on purpose. Have tried to encourage them to stay. There is no money and probably no future for Extension. In these changing times, it's hard to encourage ANYONE to enter Extension. I've encouraged them to keep their option open in terms of schooling.

I encouraged one woman to get another job [in order to have time] for her children. [A job] that didn't take as many evenings & weekends.

Would you do it again? “Today’s working woman is faced with maintaining a traditional family role and developing a new niche for her role as career professional. Whatever route chosen, there will always be sacrifices” (Foster, 2001). When asked if they would choose this route again, participants broke into two distinct camps.

No regrets: Love of the job and the satisfaction it brings is evident through the following statements.

It is well worth the sacrifice made to be able to do what you love!

No family [to not have children] was a choice I made early in life. I love my work.

My achievements have bettered our quality of life, but I would like to be compensated for the hours I work.

I don’t have any regrets. Family always came first—just not a lot of built up leave until now.

I’m able to support my family with needed benefits of insurances, etc.

I probably would. I don’t think of them sacrifices; they’re just the drawback of pursuing my work (watershed/restoration).

Time will tell; I would not quit my job at this point.

I hope my pioneer efforts would pave a smoother road for young women in the future. It has been difficult at times.

I would make sacrifices for my job simply because I enjoy it. I have a wonderful job and I’m very fortunate that it brings needed benefits for my family.

Probably not: Reflection of the price paid and the lack of family time that cannot be retrieved or created on another plain is evidenced by these participants.

I am resigning from Extension, though I love the work, in order to have more time to do the things I want to and not work nights and weekends.

My children have spent large amounts of time away from home (babysitter) and Mom because of my job. Is it worth it? I’m not sure. Pros and Cons to both sides.

I work many nights and weekends as it is and I would choose my family again at the expense of moving up and working more nights and weekends.

Not valued enough [in my job] to make the sacrifices seem worthwhile.

I would have found a way to make grad school pay and taken other career paths if I had known I would be a spinster.

My daughter is now in college. I wish that I had spent more time with her and less time with clientele.

If I had gone into teaching I’d be making more money, working less hours and having the summer with my kids.

My dedication to Extension required moving numerous times during my career, which disrupted personal relationships. I married very late in life and never had children, though this was not a conscious choice. I regret having made my work such a high priority.

If I won the lottery, I’d be out the door in a heartbeat.

Would you encourage other women to follow this path? To encourage others to follow our paths speaks volumes about our levels of satisfaction with our situations. Quantitative findings from the sister study of this qualitative evaluation reported almost 85% of the participants as satisfied or very satisfied with their current position. However, specific comments in the open-ended section reflect approximately 50% of the respondents would encourage others to follow this path. The remaining respondents were either in a quandary or definitely determined not to encourage others along this path.

Yes, definitely: These participants were very positive in their outlook and worked to remain positive and to encourage others to reach similar goals.
If they enjoy working in agriculture they should go for their dreams. Be proud of who they [women] are.

Yes, even if they end up in the office—good benefits and good work environment.

I love it despite the occasional biases. Extension is one of the few professions that really makes you feel part of a family.

I think that it is a wonderful job and that women can make a great impact. I see more and more in our state. It makes things easier for me and all of us [in the profession].

I think women have a lot to offer the field of agriculture extension and now there are many examples of women excelling in a wide-range of fields. I think women can do absolutely anything they set their minds to.

It depends: Another group of participants professed enjoying their work, but had serious concerns over limited opportunities for advancement and the serious toll taken on family time.

If they enjoy ag. I see no reason to discourage anyone; however, I would encourage them to take other classes that would prepare them for horticulture, nursery, community development, etc.

If they are single it is enjoyable, challenging work, but it [the job] will take all the time you let it. I can’t see being an ag extension educator and the kind of mother one needs to be.

Not at this time: These respondents voiced great concern over the tenuous budgets of Extension. This concern, coupled with several other factors, led them to feel unable to encourage others to enter the profession.

Until we are paid our worth and treated with respect there’s no need to encourage anyone to go into this discipline.

CE [Cooperative Extension] is in danger of becoming extinct. Ag education issues are becoming secondary to less research-based sustainability issues.

Jobs in ag are few; the money is there but only for a select few. Opportunities are better in other fields for money and advancement. I can no longer participate in school job fairs with a good conscience.

Not in the current budget and political climate. At least not in this state. I have a feeling that Extension’s days are numbered here.

These comments, although collected and sorted into tidy categories, return over and over again to three primary themes. Concern over personal time and family sacrifice re-surfaces in every main category. Likewise, concern over equitable salaries is voiced throughout the comment sections. Although the participants profess to be satisfied with their work, there are still great concerns regarding issues of respect and acceptance by male peers and clientele. If Extension truly values the diversity brought by women with agricultural responsibilities, new and more intense methods for mentoring and developing their skills must be developed. In addition, the researchers suggest ongoing studies be employed to track both the success and longevity of women in this sector and the number of new female recruits nationwide.

Educational Value/Practical Importance

This study reported on the perceptions and reflections of women agricultural extension agents. Remembering this study was a census, the trends and factors reported here carry even more startling weight. According to the United Nations, women have still not achieved equality with men in any country in the world. Realizing the United States’ model for extension education is utilized in countries around the world, the need to seek out and understand the perceptions of women pioneers in the field becomes both powerful and urgent. If we value the diversity of gender we must continue to seek the reasons for lack of acceptance and innovative ways for families and careers to mesh in a positive manner. The future of the profession depends on it. This study has provided valuable insight into the reality of women extension agents with agricultural responsibilities.

References


