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Centre for Agricultural Strategy



Smallfarmers' Association

Strategies for family-worked farms in the UK

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19 The farmer's wife: her role in the farm business

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INTRODUCTION

In spite of its continuing replacement by capital, labour remains a key resource in UK agriculture and the farm family a major provider of that resource. At present the number of farmers and farm family workers in the UK exceeds the hired workforce by several thousand (MAFF, 1982). Although it was only in 1977 that farmers' wives achieved formal statistical recognition with their inclusion in the MAFF June Census, they have always been a significant part of the workforce. But what is their role in today's farm businesses?

Three members of the Farm Management Unit at the University of Reading recently studied the role of the farmer's wife in some UK farm businesses (Buchanan *et al*, 1982). This paper highlights their main findings and discusses some of their wider implications.

THE SAMPLE

The Reading study was based on a postal survey of the wives of farmers and farm managers working on 260 farms covered by the Farm Management Survey in Central Southern England. The response rate was 60%, with no reminders, but because of the nature of the sample it is accepted that the findings may not be representative of all farmer's wives in the U.K. (As only 7% of the respondents were the wives of farm managers, the term 'farmer's wife' is used to cover both farmers' and farm managers' wives.) However, in order to set the findings in context, the respondents' farms were compared with those recorded in the MAFF

June Census in terms of size (crops and grass area) and farm type. This comparison showed that the farms covered by the survey were strongly biased towards the larger sizes with 54% over 100 ha compared with only 11% nationally. In terms of farm type, livestock rearing farms were less represented than in the national pattern while dairy and arable farms were over-represented.

THE WIFE'S ROLE

The report details the wife's role in relation to the farm business — a role which she is usually fulfilling in addition to that of housewife and mother. It describes her involvement, either on a 'regular' or 'occasional' basis, in a number of activities ranging from manual work on the holding to providing meals for employees and goes on to consider those enterprises for which she may be responsible. Taken as a whole, the responses to this survey emphasise three aspects of her role. Table 1 summarises these.

The secretary/receptionist — 'the whole farm usually revolves around the farm kitchen'

The farmhouse kitchen does indeed often form the hub of the farm's communication network and the farmer's wife may not only find herself relaying messages between members of the workforce but acting as the first point of contact for visitors and telephone callers.

Table 1
Proportion of wives involved in various activities (%)

	Regularly	Occasionally	Never	Total
Office work	42	39	19	100
Dealing with callers/telephone	88	10	2	100
Manual work	18	52	30	100
Business errands	48	46	6	100
Dealing with employees	20	42	38	100
Accommodation for employees	10	20	70	100
Meals for employees	18	28	54	100
Discussing day to day business	62	33	5	100
Discussing longer term business	68	27	5	100

At the same time she will usually (42% regularly; 39% occasionally) be doing some of the office work — keeping the books, calculating VAT or working out

the wages. A third of the farms covered by the survey employed a secretary on a full or part-time basis, but even on these farms the great majority of wives were still involved in office work.

This fact has some important implications. Certainly the wife's role in this area is important to the business and many of the wives met in the course of the fieldwork demonstrated considerable pride in their ability to 'keep the books straight'. The ATB, and others, currently provide short training courses to help the farmers' wife develop her skills in this area, but is this enough? Keeping financial and physical records up to date and well organised is important, but it should not be an end in itself, for it is these records which contain some of the clues as to what is going right or wrong with the business. These clues cannot always be picked up by direct observation out on the farm for some problems (and particularly those associated with over-expenditure) build up steadily over a period of time. If the wife who is already familiar with the books is able to develop her ability to identify those strengths and weaknesses of the business which these records reveal, she can play an even more crucial role as part of the 'early warning' system which any business needs if it is to be kept properly in control.

Now that the ATB is again concerned with business as well as staff management it should consider ways in which it could help the farmer's wife develop her ability to progress from merely keeping records to making the best use of them.

Manual worker — 'prepared to do anything at any time at very short notice and regardless of what is in the oven'.

The second area of the wife's contribution to the business highlighted by the survey concerns her involvement in manual work. Though relatively few (29%) of the respondents had a specific enterprise for which they were responsible, many (18% regularly; 52% occasionally) were involved in manual work, providing an extra pair of hands (or set of wheels) to help with the farm work. It is likely that many of those reporting only 'occasional' involvement were thinking of the emergency/forget-the-dinner-the-bullocks-have-got-into-the-top-field-again-type of help as well as the times of peak labour demand where they help out at, say, harvest or lambing.

Regular involvement in manual work was one of the few activities which varied significantly according to farm size. On those farms with either no employees or only one, a much higher proportion of wives were regularly involved (28%) than on those with two or more employees (7%).

Subsequent questions to respondents on how they expected the role of the farmer's wife to change for the next generation threw further light on this.

Analysis of the replies showed a fundamental disagreement between two groups — those who felt that the wife would become more involved in the business and those who thought her involvement would be less. This polarization of replies perhaps reflects a growing division within the farming industry itself. It seems likely that British agriculture is moving towards a time when there will be two distinct sectors. In one sector will be the smaller farms, relying exclusively on family labour, where members of the family will be prepared to work long hours with meagre financial returns in order to continue with a lifestyle which they are reluctant to give up both because of family tradition and the intrinsic attractions of the lifestyle itself. Here the farmer's wife will become much more directly involved in manual work. The other part of the industry will be made up of much larger farms, many with salaried managers or run by tenants who have taken advantage of 'sale and leaseback' arrangements. Here the wife of the manager or farmer will be less likely to have much direct involvement in the day to day running of the business and perhaps more likely to take up employment opportunities off the farm.

These two contrasting roles closely resemble the 'ideal types' of 'Working Farmwife' and 'Farm Housewife' described by Gasson (1981). Insofar as smaller farms do survive into the next generation (and their resilience is impressive) farmers' wives are likely to fall more clearly into one of these categories and the 'Working Farmwife' is likely to become a relatively more common phenomenon.

The sounding board — 'actively interested in what is happening and able to give good advice'

A third important area of the wife's involvement is the part she plays in discussing the business with her husband. About 60% of the wives in the survey claimed to be regularly involved in discussions either about day-to-day business matters or about longer-term business decisions. Although their replies hint that there may be considerable variation in the weight that their husbands attach to their views, it is not possible in a postal survey to gauge the extent of their influence on farming decisions. Indeed, in many cases neither the farmer nor his wife may be fully aware of the nature and extent of the wife's influence.

However, this finding does draw attention to the part played by other members of the family in the business and as such has wider implications for those who are interested in the farm as a business. Both policy-makers and academics seek to predict behaviour (and thus decision-making) in response to a whole variety of stimuli, not least of which are prospective policy measures under consideration. While it is useful in this context to consider the farm as a business it is important not to lose sight of the fact that it is still predominantly a family business (see,

for example, Harrison, 1972). On the farm the distinction between home and business becomes blurred and the decision-making process can rarely be characterised in terms of a single entrepreneur making decisions solely in the light of his own objectives. On the other hand this survey suggests that it would be equally wrong to characterise the process as a group of decision-makers (the family) making joint decisions on the basis of several sets of (possibly conflicting) objectives. In reality, the true nature of the process will lie somewhere between these two extremes, but the person who ignores the fact that many farm business decisions are in fact as much influenced by family developments as by business developments is taking some large strides away from reality.

THE FAMILY FARM

The attention which this study directs to the family nature of most farm businesses also raises two other points. In the first place it indicates another area where adequate planning is required. The present author has already indicated the significance of the family cycle in determining the income requirements of the family farm business as it begins to take on board the succeeding generation (Errington, 1982) but when the farm is seen as a family business the central issue of the transfer of control between the two generations is itself thrown into sharp relief. Considerable attention has been paid by farm management specialists to planning key business developments such as the introduction of a new enterprise or the installation of a new parlour. Standard techniques are now available to help guide the farmer in these areas yet, on the most crucial change of all — the transfer of control — the professional adviser is apt to be silent on most matters apart from tax planning. More research is needed to identify the factors associated with the successful transfer of the farm business so that useful advice can be provided.

The second point to which this focus on the family farm business gives rise is the use of the term 'family farm' itself. In everyday use the term has come to denote a particular stereotype and is often used as a synonym for 'small' or 'less market-orientated'. Indeed, Newby (1980) uses it to label one such cell in his typology of British farmers. Many family farms in Britain do not conform to this stereotype. On the contrary many are very substantial in terms of area, numbers employed and net worth. A more differentiated view is required and we should recognise that farms which are run as family businesses do not form a single homogeneous type whether they are being viewed as economic units or as social units.

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