

CHOICES: A DILEMMA OF WOMEN AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

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Abstract

In a non-traditional field for women such as agricultural education, the concept of feminist research provides a lens to better regard issues such as balancing family and work life. This study is an attempt to systematically process the individual stories and reflections of women agricultural education teachers across America. Qualitative techniques including historical research and selected survey statements were used to accomplish the objectives of the study.

Society has reached an impasse dealing with working women. A mother is supposed to be a caregiver, but in today's economy she is often expected to be a wage earner. The unique challenges that face the working woman, in a non-traditional field, are reflected through the comments and opinions of the women involved in this study.

Introduction

*Over in the meadow in the sand and the sun
lived an old mother turtle and her little
turtle one. "Dig," said the mother, "I dig,"
said the one; So he dug and was happy in
the sand and the sun.*

*Over in the meadow where the tall grass
grew lived an old mother red fox and her
little foxes two. "Run," said the mother, "We
run," said the two; So they ran and were
glad where the tall grass grew.*

*Over in the meadow in a warm little den
lived an old mother rabbit and her little
bunnies ten. "Hop," said the mother, "We
hop," said the ten; So they hopped and were
glad in their little warm den.*

(Langstaff, J., 1957)

Children grow and learn from simple songs and nursery rhymes. As they mature into adults their values and work ethic are often molded and guided from those early nursery rhymes (Wolf, 1949). Traditionally, boys become men and are seen as responsible for the livelihood of their families. Girls become women and are blessed with the responsibilities of motherhood. In the opening rhyme, the message sent is clear. *Not only are mothers expected to care for their children, they are responsible for basic life skills training. There is not even a mention of the fathers' duties.* Society spent 7000 years creating

this image (Johnson, 1997). How does this image fit into the life of a working woman?

Theoretical Framework

Feminist researchers often pose questions that relate to the centrality of gender in the shaping of our consciousness. The aim of this ideological research is to "correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position" (Creswell, 1998, p. 83.). In a non-traditional field for women such as agricultural education, the concept of feminist research provides a lens to better regard issues such as balancing family and work life. Perhaps this paper is best described as a phenomenological study. This paper, is an attempt to systematically process the individual stories and reflections of women agricultural education teachers across America.

In May of 2000, surveys from a basic descriptive study designed to develop a profile of women in agricultural education began to arrive in the Department of Agricultural Education at the University of Arizona. As the surveys were opened and readied for entry into an SPSS analysis program, it became apparent that an interesting phenomenon had occurred. Women agricultural education teachers from across the United States did more than complete the simple survey. They chose to pen their thoughts and feelings regarding a

number of topics in the extra space and margins of the survey instrument. The information contained in these comments was so rich with insight, the researcher decided to log the comments and found that 1093 different comments were penned from 579 completed surveys. Those comments were divided into similar topics and this paper will address the segment that revolved around family, children and personal aspects of the subjects' lives.

The original survey enjoyed a return rate in excess of sixty percent. Issued at one of the busiest times of the year for agricultural education teachers, the fact the survey garnered such a vast number of unsolicited comments was indicative of the high level of emotion attached to the issues that surfaced.

As the researcher sorted the comments, similarities of personal experience and the experiences and concerns that were voiced by the women's comments led to the emergence of questions regarding women in agricultural education. *Do women in agricultural education face different issues than men? Are the challenges women face acknowledged by their male counterparts and their administrators? How far will women go in trying to balance their personal life and family with their chosen career?*

According to the United States Department of Labor, the passage of the 19th amendment in 1920, granting women the right to vote, provided the precedent for other legislation aimed at improving the conditions of women. Legislation in the early 1960's opened up more job opportunities for women. The *Equal Pay Act of 1963* provided for equal pay for equal work without regard to sex. *Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964* protects workers from discrimination in employment. The passage of *Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972*, prohibiting sex discrimination in public education, allowed women to obtain greater opportunities to educate themselves for a wider array of occupational specialties (USDL Women's Bureau, 2000). However, none of these laws provide for the intricate and delicate balancing act of the working mother. Realizing this, the researcher returned to the comments penned by the women surveyed.

I am considering leaving my much loved ag position because it has been impossible to be the mother I want and need to be, and to be the ag teacher I feel is expected of me—one who sacrifices a personal life for a job. I love kids & I love teaching them about ag—but, I feel we need to, as a profession, decide how to support a well balanced family life. I do not feel like my family comes first—that is, I feel I am frowned upon for choosing family over “the job.” -- *Discouraged, possibly leaving position comment*

The challenge of balancing family life and career is not unique to agricultural education. Joyce Purnick, keynote speaker for the graduating class of Barnard College in New York, set off a controversy when she stated “I am absolutely convinced that I would not be the Metro editor of the New York Times if I had had a family.” The lesson of her experience, she advised the young women was, “You cannot have it all.” (Dowd, 1998). This viewpoint was echoed by the comment of one seasoned female agricultural education teacher:

.... respect for education should be stressed. Competence and credibility will make successful teachers. All teachers of agriculture must be willing to work hard, give up personal time, and take the heat as role models not “yes” people. Women and men must be able and willing to do the job. The job shouldn't change because women aren't comfortable with the work load. If they choose motherhood they must sacrifice either career time or child time just as the men have.—
Advice based on experience comment

Although both men and women can become loving parents, the mother's role is unique as the major caregiver providing nurturing to young children (Johnson, 1997). At this point the researcher's perspective shifted to include the realization that many of the issues facing women in agricultural education, as a non-traditional field, are the

same as issues facing any working woman in today's society. This led to the formation of more questions: Do all women face the same issues regarding family? Does society expect women to maintain the dual roles of full-time wife and mother and full-time, devoted agricultural education teacher? Is all responsibility for maintaining those roles directed to the women who choose that path? Again the concepts of feminist ethnography arise. By describing and raising questions about women's multiple identities this study leads toward the development of action frameworks in the interest of realizing social justice for women (Glesne, 1999).

Historically, women enter the labor force, then leave to care for their families and return to work later in life. However, the 1980's noted the change of this pattern to one that more often mirrored the pattern of men in the labor force. That pattern reflects a gradual increase to a peak career point followed by a gradual decline, with the participation being continual throughout their career life (USDL Women's Bureau, 2000). Today's working woman is faced with maintaining a traditional family role and developing a new niche for her role as mother and career professional. Whatever route chosen, there will always be sacrifices. The following quotes reflect opinions of professional journalists interviewed as successful women in their field:

You have to be well organized and husband your time. It isn't easy. But it is possible, and not only that, it is necessary. The country can't afford to have women opt out of either work or family. The world is too competitive to quit for a few years and expect to get back on the treadmill.

...A professional life can be postponed or delayed until at least your child is in the fifth or sixth year of life....Those early years are so extraordinarily important, I don't think the child's loss can be justified by the fact that a mother has become a "success".

There are days when I feel split in half. But I think I'm a better

employee and manager because I've raised children. It helps you understand more about motivation, stimulation, negotiation, discipline and patience...You also need to find a work environment that's supportive of family. They exist. (Dowd, 1998, p. 22).

The juggling act of balancing family and career is not unique to women in agricultural education. It is a very real dilemma for all working mothers. In a 1994 look at Idaho pre-service and alumni women in agricultural education, Whittington and Bowman found that undergraduate women desired to be successful in their chosen careers. However, working to improve the quality of life, especially in their community and to provide better opportunities for their children and future generations, were given greater importance in their career decision-making (Whittington and Bowman, 1994).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to describe the unique challenges, regarding personal lives, family and children, facing women agricultural education teachers. Specific objectives included:

1. Identify roles and responsibilities unique to women agricultural education teachers, as expressed through comments added to a quantitative survey, and
2. Identify perceptions of women agricultural education teachers regarding balancing personal life and career.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was used. Two techniques were employed to accomplish the objectives of the study: historical research and selected survey statements. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), more general conceptual themes can be used when ordering qualitative data. The analyst attempted to blend inferences drawn directly from the survey statements and group those statements according to themes.

The population consisted of all the female secondary agricultural education

teachers employed in the United States, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. A stratified random sample by the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE) regional divisions allowed each region to be represented in proportion to the number of women in their total secondary agricultural education population. State Supervisors of agricultural education were contacted to identify current teacher roles and to help identify female teachers in each state.

The actual survey statements used were the result of comments made in the margins and on extra sheets of the original quantitative questionnaires. It should be noted that one of the questions in the original quantitative survey asked what participants saw as female agricultural education teachers' greatest challenge or barrier. Some of the comments reported here stem directly from that question.

Findings

The separate comments found regarding balancing family and career were grouped and reported by objective. In order to maintain authenticity of the original meanings, the comments reported may include grammatical errors. In addition, the researcher chose to remove any possible identifying factors, such as locations or names, in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Objective 1. Identify roles and responsibilities unique to women agricultural education teachers, as expressed through comments added to a quantitative survey.

- Time for family and children This category garnered the most responses for Objective 1. Respondents in this group professed great frustration with trying to maintain professional standards and still have quality family or personal time. The following comments reflect the perceptions of women across the country.

Definitely personal time is a minimum. I should see the Dr. regarding a blood pressure problem, but I just haven't had

time in the last 3 months—I wish I could have spent more time w/my son, but ag ed is a demanding job.

Being an agriculture teacher is perhaps the best of both worlds for me. I love the time encouraging students to learn and getting them to understand they are worth something. Yet the restrictions in funding and family involvement are very stressful. I lead a very full life and want my family involved and able to travel with me, but due to some state restrictions, spouse involvement and children (underage) is limited. I don't teach for the money, but for the hope that I make a difference. We need a little help though.

The “women can't teach agriculture” belief and the time ag requires of your personal time makes being a wife and mom a bit harder.

I am lucky that I am $\frac{3}{4}$ time and don't start until 10:00 am. That allows me time to spend with my son and do housework in the mornings. It is stressful being a woman and trying to balance a career and do all the things you need to do at home.

I never really sat down until this survey to see how many hours a week I put into my job PROVING myself vs. my own family time. Thank you for opening my eyes.

I teach in a multi-teacher department (two males). I don't think they realize with two young children how hard it is for me to be gone three weeks out of the summer to camp, convention, etc. I would rather not have 55 days extended employment. I regret not spending more time with my family.

- Choosing not to have, or fear of having a family Comments that fell into this category provided specific insights to the issues revolving around families and the great internal conflict created by society's paradoxical expectations of the roles

women play (Beck, 1997). The fact that any young woman feels it necessary to choose between establishing a personal life and a career points to a unique difference between male and female agricultural education teachers.

Will I be able to do this and have children?

A general attitude of having to prove you will put family matters aside to put job first (is prevalent).

As I have enjoyed my time in the high school, I have decided that it would be extremely difficult to start a family and teach agriculture. I'd not feel that I would be able to devote the appropriate time to maintain a program and develop a family. Currently, I am looking for possibly a teaching position that would allow more time for family.

I don't have children because I would have to sacrifice parts of my career. If I choose to have children I will probably quit teaching for a period of time.

My greatest barrier is when I get married and decide to have kids, how will I make time for my family and still maintain a very successful ag program?

January 2000, it was mentioned to me and put to me by my administrator that my position may be reduced to part-time and that "part-time might not be so bad now that you have two kids at home." I have two babies, a 1½ year old girl and a four month old baby boy. I had just come off a two-month maternity leave. I was shocked and insulted that the subject had even come up.

The ag teaching world has become so demanding. I am about to remarry and I am seriously struggling with how I will ever be able to fit children into my schedule. In _____ there are FFA invitationals every Saturday from late February until the end of April. I spend at least two nights a week at FFA events.

It is really too demanding of a female to be expected to work so many hours and still be "domestic" at home.

Family commitment VS work commitment—I chose NOT to have children.

- *Dealing with guilt* Comments in this category reflected an ongoing battle against guilt. From birth most American women continually receive at least three paradoxical messages: 1) boys and girls are, and should be, completely different from each other; 2) girls have an inferior station and to win praise they must excel in "male" areas; and 3) if you are born female you must conform to society's model of a proper girl (Beck, 1997). Women who fail to meet any of these or the many other paradoxes our society provides them with tend to become enveloped with guilt.

I have not noticed that much of a difference being a woman ag teacher. The biggest problem is being a mom and feeling guilty leaving my son while doing FFA activities.

I believe it is important for this study to show that female ag teachers with families feel a tremendous guilt when forced to spend the endless number of hours after school in ag ed. I have chosen to place my family first and have taken a job with no FFA involvement in order to do so. I believe there is much negativism toward us by the male ag teachers when we choose this route.

A mother's job is never done.

Older teachers generally frown upon women ag teachers. They don't closely associate themselves with you at meetings, etc. Even when you're doing a great job your on the outside looking in. I have been criticized when I have made my family my priority. My family has had to take a backseat to my job. My daughter has been to many meetings.

You tend to find yourself spending more time with other people's children than your own and you do begin to wonder if you're appreciated. In relation to male teachers, there is a difference when (mom) is the one away on trips, at meetings and away from home for many hours. You must have a very supportive husband. Lucky for me, I do.

- Spousal support Other differences between male and female expectations, were found in comments regarding spousal support. Although fewer direct comments were made in this area, indirect inferences elsewhere led to the value of having a separate category. Where men are taught from birth to expect support from their wife and family, women often tend to feel as though that same support is a gift instead of a reasonable expectation of a partner (Johnson, 1997).

Without a supportive spouse, I would not be able to fulfill my teaching duties, much less any professional activities.

Balancing a home and family & keeping an active agriculture program successful is very challenging. My husband graciously keeps the children and transports them to daycare in order to allow me to travel on FFA trips. Otherwise, I couldn't go.

Traditional attitudes, a lot of male teachers had/have wives at home to raise children, keep house work, etc., doing both is tricky.

It's difficult to leave home to attend conferences & conventions when you don't have a "wife."

Much stress on marriage. If my husband hadn't been a Star Farmer in FFA while in school, (we) probably would be divorced.

- Single mom issues Perhaps not unique to women, the perspectives

here are certainly different from their male counterparts. Although this area garnered the fewest comments overall, they do reflect perspectives unique to women in this challenging role.

As a single mom, there are many advantages to teaching ag. The first is that my salary is high enough to support my daughter & myself. The second is that schools are basically friendly to moms. I have sick days, I can take her to school & she rides the bus over from the elementary every day. I work many after-school hours, but almost all the activities are kid friendly, & she learns from being with me. My daughter understands & appreciates my work; and I feel very lucky to be able to raise her as I teach.

I am a single parent and always have been and that has been a challenge with the long hours that an ag teacher spends.

I have been fortunate that my children have had an interest in FFA over the years. Therefore we spend time together. (My son and I were at the same middle school 5-8th then I went to the same high school that he did.) It worked out very nicely for me. I am a single parent.

Objective 2. Identify perceptions of women agricultural education teachers regarding balancing personal life and career.

- Maintaining a balancing act This grouping had the largest number of individual comments found under both objectives. Throughout all the individual comments the general sentiment was touted that it is extremely difficult to maintain what society defines as a "normal household" and what is perceived as a "successful career." The following excerpts provide a sample of the trend of comments from all six NAAE regions.

(The greatest challenge) raising a family & doing a good job teaching & being an outstanding FFA advisor.

Balancing home and school. You still must perform the wife and mother duties along with the full-time teaching duties. It gets a little overwhelming at times.

I think the hardest task in teaching ag is learning the balance between family and teacher (FFA advisor). After I had my son, working out stock shows, judging contests or FFA meetings was hard.

Having a family—it is very difficult to balance this career and a husband and child.

Females face problems once a family is here. It is hard to play the “wife” role, “mother” role, and “teacher” role. I feel this is harder for a female than a male. Expectations from home are stronger as well as in the work force!

Balancing work and family—it seems easier for men to work extra hours, attend community and high school sports functions and be visible in the small community. I have two families to care for—mine and the school.

I faced biases 16 years ago that new teachers do not have to (those biases seem to be gone). I don't think women are judged by the fact they are a woman anymore. However, if a woman tells you she doesn't face challenges—if she's married and especially (if she) has children—she must not be much of a mother, wife and/or teacher. I was not prepared for the changes I would have to make when I had children and there was no one who was available to advise me other than men, and quite frankly, they couldn't relate.

- *Discouraged, possibly leaving position* Although fewer responses fell into this category, this may be the group with the most critical insight overall. Engulfed in a national shortage of teachers (Camp,

1999), the concerns and reflections described in these comments may shadow a coming change.

At the end of the school year, I will be leaving teaching to complete my MS in Ag Education & Human Resource Training & Development. I then plan to pursue either a PhD in AgEd or a law degree. I am leaving teaching due to the demands it places on my family. I spend way too much time away from home.

I'm currently discouraged as a woman ag teacher. For me it has gotten harder and harder as I added marriage, then one child, & now 2 children. I personally believe I am not treated with the same “go get ‘em” attitude as before due to adding family responsibilities. I'm not considered one of the group (as before) and not because I don't work hard enough or produce enough. I think there is discrimination, for I've seen male counterparts not affected in their status at district or state level due to increased family responsibilities. Also, male ag teachers are quick to downgrade due to gender for non-attendance or low performance and not noticing other male counterparts' incompetence.

I wish I had more time for my family. FFA and teaching have many weekend and night activities. I feel that these activities are important for my students, but it takes away from my family time. I don't want my children to hate my job, FFA, or agriculture for taking their mother from them. I also will not give up my marriage for this job. I find farming to be less stressful than teaching. I may teach again, but not in this district ever.

I am tired. In order to be employed, my superintendent expects high standards. In order to meet those my family suffers. I would never recommend a woman raising a family to be an ag teacher.

Conclusions

Society has reached an impasse dealing with working women. A mother is supposed to be a caregiver, but in today's economy she is often expected to be a wage earner. Citizens and legislators have raised concerns about mothers who worked too much outside their homes; or conversely, mothers who did not work enough to support their families (Goodwin, 1995). Further compounding this paradox is the addition of working women in non-traditional fields. With only 16 percent of the total secondary agricultural education teaching force being female (Camp, 1998), agricultural education still qualifies as a non-traditional field for women. The unique challenges that face them in this field may be experienced by their male counterparts, but typically not on a regular basis.

Women are not traditionally thought of as agricultural education teachers. The fact that only 16 percent of the agricultural education teacher population are women, gives credence to the concept that the tradition still holds true (Foster, 2000). Changes in education and societal thinking are key components in encouraging young women in non-traditional fields (Johnson, 1997).

The comments and opinions reflected in this paper provide an outline of the challenges that are unique to women agricultural education teachers. Each grouping of comments provides its own insight into that part of a woman's life.

Choosing Not to Have or Fear of Having a Family

The fact that there are young females in the agricultural education profession who question if they will be able to have children and still do their job, is reflective of a paradox within this field. While espousing the concept of the "agricultural education family" and the parental role that teachers often are expected to fill, the fact that any young professional must choose between a family and their career points to the obvious conclusion that the definition of what is expected of a secondary agricultural education teacher needs to be reviewed.

Dealing With Guilt

The comments reflecting the concern many of the subjects had regarding their time away from family, along with the actual confessions of guilt at not spending enough time with their children or spouse denotes an ongoing dilemma that continues to add to the normal stress loads experienced by all agricultural education teachers. A study of male secondary agricultural education teachers' perceptions of the same issues could prove quite enlightening on the professions' expectations of teachers.

Discouraged, Possibly Leaving Position

As agricultural education continues to seek a method of recruiting and retaining quality teachers, a close look at the reasons described by these participants may open the doors to considering alternative teaching assignments. Although many women teachers are ranked among some of the top in the field, they cannot be expected to maintain high levels of involvement without risk to personal happiness and physical health. Their days do not end simply because they have arrived at home.

Maintaining a Balancing Act

Martha Beck (1997) notes that one of the paradoxes engulfing American women is the belief that they can only achieve success if they are successful in an accepted "male" role. Women in non-traditional fields are at high risk of succumbing to this paradox. The high number of statements reflecting the need and challenge to maintain a quality agricultural education/FFA program (based on male defined standards) while also maintaining an exemplary home life may explain the high turnover among women agricultural education teachers.

Single Mom Issues

Interestingly women who were single mothers reported less frustration with balancing family and career than those women with a traditional family unit. One possible reason for this difference is seen in the readiness of the single mother to take her children with her. A married mother feels the need to touch base with her partner and to maintain the concept of a physical location as the definition of home.

Spousal Support

It is ironic that many of the women in this study seemed to feel the role of a parent is singular and not a partnership. Time after time respondents referred to the sacrifice of their husbands when asked to care for their children. Although the agricultural education community cannot be expected to change society's perception of the role of a mother, the profession can remove the blinders that promote the concept that male and female teachers have exactly the same expectations put upon them, both in public and private lives.

Time for Family and Children

Respondents reflected on the universal issue for agricultural education teachers of both genders, that there never seems to be enough time for work and personal life. Underlying the need for more time is the female trait of trying to be all things to all people. Considering Beck's definition of the female paradox in American society, it becomes obvious that the stress associated with lack of time increases on average for professional women.

Implications and Recommendations

This study reported the reflections and perceptions of the female agricultural education population. While reporting only a limited number of participants, it should be remembered that the majority of the comments reviewed were unsolicited. Based on these comments, the researcher recommends the continual study of this group of women along with studies of their male counterparts in order to gain a clearer perspective of the personal and professional profiles of secondary agricultural education teachers. In addition, studies reflecting the working relationships of female agricultural education teachers and their administrators would add even more insight into this area. If quality teachers are to be recruited and maintained in the profession, a clear understanding of their needs and personal goals must be gained.

In an era reflecting major concern regarding the teacher supply for agricultural education it would seem that one major category has been overlooked. Although Camp (1998) continues to report increases in

the number of women prepared to teach agricultural education, equal increases are not reflected in the working force. It would appear that a vast untapped source of qualified teachers is not being utilized. Perhaps, as a profession, studies regarding alternative job descriptions and teacher retention should focus on the female perspective.

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